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ABSTRACT

A counseling perspective is applied to issues concerning the preparation of high school students with learning disabilities for postsecondary education and employment settings. The combination of academic limitations and difficulties in getting along with others provide continuing problems for these young adults. Instructional and counseling services need to help these students become increasingly more self-sufficient, independent thinkers who can self-advocate and be responsible for their actions. The literature review and discussion also considers such issues as the need to teach the generalization of learning strategies, the need for student placement teams to stress development of independence and responsibility, careful consideration of implications for future options when simplified or modified courses are taken, and the critical importance of social skill development. Eight suggestions offered by learning disabled college students for college-bound learning disabled high school students are listed. Also outlined are seven recommended steps in planning for transition. Contains 14 references. (DB)

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Preparing Students with Learning Disabilities for Postsecondary Education: Issues and Future Needs

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Abstract

As a result of increased attention brought about by legal mandates and the efforts of parent advocacy and disability rights groups, programmatic support for high school students with learning disabilities has increased, enabling many more students to successfully complete their education. Nevertheless, students with learning disabilities make up the greatest percentage of handicapped students between 16-21 who drop out of school, while many subsequently become under- or unemployed after high school. It is clear that academic limitations coupled with social issues related to getting along with others continue to present problems beyond high school for these young adults.

Difficulties encountered by these students in both educational and employment settings indicate that we face yet another challenge. Instructional and counseling services for students with learning disabilities must be developed to help them become increasingly more self-sufficient, independent thinkers who can self-advocate and be responsible for their actions. The transition from high school requires a sense of independence founded on strong self-advocacy skills and an ability to transfer learning strategies across curricular boundaries and into the real world. Secondary programs must be enhanced to do more than just ensure "survival" of learning disabled students in high school. Parents and educators will have to work together to help students move along the continuum from dependence and "learned helplessness" to independence and self-advocacy.

Introduction: Success and Future Needs

This is an era full of challenge and change with regard to the education of adolescents with learning disabilities. As a result of increased attention brought about by legal mandates and the efforts of parent advocacy and disability rights groups, support for high school programs for students with learning disabilities has increased, enabling many more students to successfully complete their education. To the surprise of some, students with learning disabilities are graduating from high school in larger numbers each year. National data (Butler-Nalin & Padilla, 1989; Ninth Annual Report, 1987) indicate that about 60% of LD students graduate, nearly half (47%) with high school diplomas (Ninth Annual Report, 1987). In addition, more than half of these learning disabled high school graduates intend to pursue postsecondary education (Mithaug, Horiuchi & Fanning, 1985; White, Alley, Deshler, Schumaker, Warner & Clark, 1982). As a result of success in high school, the number of students with learning disabilities enrolling in college has increased tenfold in the last decade (Learning Disability Update, 1986), so that students with learning disabilities now make up 1.2% of the total freshman class. It is clear that secondary programs which were intended to develop the skills of students with learning disabilities and propel them toward graduation have been largely successful.

On the other hand, students with learning disabilities make up the largest percentage (47%) of handicapped students aged 16-21 who drop out of school (Tenth Annual Report, 1988). The National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students (Wagner, 1989) found the dropout rate over a two year period for secondary special education students to be 36%, in comparison to about 25% for nondisabled students. Students with learning disabilities, who comprise the majority

of secondary special education students, had a dropout rate of 36% (Wagner, 1989). This relatively large drop-out rate has, no doubt, contributed to the serious problems of underemployed and unemployed adults with learning disabilities documented by several studies (Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; McGuire, 1986; Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985; Zigmond & Thornton, 1985).

Transition from High School to Employment

The transition from high school to employment settings presents some unique obstacles for adults with learning disabilities. Academic limitations coupled with social issues related to getting along with others continue to present problems beyond high school and into adulthood (Brill & Brown, 1985). In a research study conducted by the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center (Hoffman, Sheldon, Minskoff, Sautter, Steidle, Baker, Bailey, & Echols, 1987), some of the major reasons for employment problems as perceived by adults with learning disabilities were: filling out employment applications, finding a job and job training, reading want ads, and interviewing for jobs.

The same study indicated that service providers differed slightly in their perception of the problems LD adults face in getting and keeping jobs. While there was agreement that the steps required in seeking a job were problematic (filling out applications, knowing where to find a job and job training), 49% of the service providers indicated that difficulty in following directions was the major problem for adults with learning disabilities. In addition, learning new job skills, taking criticism, working within time constraints, and interviewing for jobs were also perceived by

service providers as significant problems. For young adults with learning disabilities who are making the transition out of high school, difficulties in finding and keeping a job may prove to be even more significant. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) found that only 38% of the students with learning disabilities who were out of school for more than one year were employed full-time, while 19% were working part-time (Wagner, 1989).

Transition from High School to Postsecondary Education

Transition from high school to postsecondary education is also a difficulty for adolescents with learning disabilities who may experience repeated failure and frustration. Demands for self-motivation and personal responsibility required in a college setting present a challenge to any student, but this is especially true for students with learning disabilities. As illustrated in Figure 1 (McGuire, 1988), high school students are in class about six hours a day. Often they report having to spend a limited amount of time completing homework assignments. In contrast, many college students may spend only 12 hours per week in class, but need to study 3-4 hours per day. Studying in high school is often synonymous with "doing homework." In college, studying may mean rewriting lecture notes, paraphrasing information from reading assignments, and integrating information gleaned from a variety of sources (e.g., texts, class lectures, library assignments). While high school students are often tested frequently, sometimes weekly on course material, college courses may have

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

only 2-4 tests per semester, making it more difficult for students and faculty to monitor academic progress. Furthermore, college students are expected to be much more independent in matters of class attendance and completion of assignments than they were in high school. While it may be sufficient for high school students to memorize facts, college professors often require students to think analytically, as well as be able to synthesize abstract information.

High school students find their time is structured by limitations set by parents and teachers, while college students are faced with the freedom to make their own decisions about scheduling their time. Along with the need for self-motivation in academic areas, college students with learning disabilities must also be responsible for making their needs known. This is in contrast to high school where a student is rarely responsible for determining and requesting his/her special needs. In addition to the increased academic demands upon students with learning disabilities in postsecondary education, a new environment away from the familiar support of family and friends may highlight already existing problems with self-concept and social or inter-personal skills. As a result, social-emotional factors may lead to significant on-going problems of loneliness, frustration and unhappiness for the young adult with learning disabilities.

Issues We Face

High school teachers may have encountered some of the following situations in their classrooms. Postsecondary service providers also need to be aware of these concerns. How would you respond to the following questions?

1) When was the last time your students brought their notebooks to class?

2) Are class notes, handouts, old tests and quizzes dated and properly inserted in their notebooks?

3) If you told your students that the next test would cover all material from March 1 to the present, would your students have any idea what would be on the test?

4) If you asked to see today's notes from Biology, would your students start searching through their pockets looking for the "scrap" they took those notes on? Or would you hear, "I left it in my locker," or "We don't take notes there"?

5) Are your students aware of assignment pads, but feel they were meant to be used by others?

6) Do you feel you are straining your budget buying pens and pencils for those students who never have either?

7) Do you ever wonder what skills you are teaching your students which will enable them to be successful and independent, both during their school years and after they graduate?

8) When is the last time your students took responsibility for failure?

(Spector & Decker, 1989; p. 33-34)

We find that these kinds of questions elicit responses which are almost universal. Professionals nod and smile uncomfortably as they realize these problems characterize the students in their programs. It is not surprising to find that many students with learning disabilities lack time management and organization skills, as well as the motivation and sense of responsibility necessary for completing assignments. Given these concerns, teachers may wonder if the approach they are using will enable students to be successful learners and independent problem solvers in postsecondary education and employment settings.

This dilemma may have been created in part by the organization of special education services in public schools and legal requirements mandated by PL 94-142. It may be that the method of teaching and the content of what is taught in special education are directed primarily towards the goal of "survival" in high school. The role of the resource room teacher may be largely that of content tutor, especially as the student's need for help with homework continues. A national survey (Wells, Schmidt, Algozzine, & Maher; 1983) indicated that 42% of special educators at the high school level spent most of their instructional time in content areas. Subject matter tutoring may act as a short term band-aid, but it does not provide strategic learning and problem solving skills which transfer across the curriculum. Instruction in learning strategies not only addresses immediate needs, but also teaches students to analyze and solve new problems present in both academic and nonacademic environments (Deshler & Schumaker, 1986). Without such skills, students with learning disabilities are often ill-prepared for the transition to postsecondary education and employment.

From the counseling point of view, there are several issues to consider. In the transition from junior high to high school, student placement teams should give more consideration in their recommendations to the development of independence and responsibility. In addition to encouraging students to take an active part in the development of their Individual Education Programs (IEP) and Individual Transition Programs (ITP), as recommended in the Ninth Annual Report (1987), students should be made more aware of the nature of their strengths and weaknesses. This process will enable them to make appropriate career and education choices, while providing them with a better understanding of their needs so that they may request appropriate accommodations and modifications in college.

Too often students with learning disabilities are counseled to take modified or simplified courses which allow academic credit toward graduation, but which subsequently provide only limited training for independence or transition to post-secondary education or employment. This type of curriculum modification may also contribute to gaps in prior knowledge, creating significant problems in mainstreamed college courses where faculty teach to the "norm." Since many colleges and universities have foreign language and math requirements for admissions consideration, waivers for these courses at the high school level may also substantially limit a student's options at the postsecondary level. Further, course waivers should be appropriately based upon valid diagnostic data, and the student and parents should be made aware of the implications waivers may have in considering postsecondary options.

A final consideration in counseling students with learning disabilities is the development of social skills. Many times well-meaning families and high school personnel protect these students from potential failure and stress by making decisions for them, thus creating a dependency upon others. Some of these young adults graduate from high school without the social skills necessary to function successfully in the real world.

The issues we face focus on teaching high school students with learning disabilities to become more independent thinkers and problem solvers, as well as more responsible for determining and advocating for their own needs. With this in mind, college students with learning disabilities at the University of Connecticut have offered the following suggestions for the college-bound learning disabled high school

student (McGuire, 1987):

1) Understand your learning disability and how you learn best before going to college,
2) Develop strong study habits, especially in time management,
3) Have well-developed basic skills in grammar and math,
4) Build self-confidence by taking on more difficult tasks,
5) Try to develop writing skills for taking essay tests,
6) Develop self-advocacy skills in order to ask professors for necessary accommodations,
7) Seek help as soon as admitted to college, and
8) Be prepared to study hard and set realistic goals.

Programming Options

Secondary school personnel should implement service delivery models for students with learning disabilities which encourage independence. Both instructional and counseling services should help students become increasingly more self-sufficient, independent thinkers who can self-advocate and be responsible for their actions.

As an alternative to the traditional resource room which features content and basic skills teaching approaches, learning strategies should be taught. A curriculum incorporating study skills has the goal of promoting independent and responsible learning (Spector & Decker, 1989). Two key components of responsible learning are

organization and learning strategies. The goal of learning strategies instruction is to increase performance by teaching students how to acquire, organize, store and retrieve information (Deshler, Schumaker, Lenz, & Ellis, 1984). Generalizable skills such as outlining and notetaking, memory techniques, test taking techniques, study methods, and word processing are basic learning strategies which can be incorporated into a regular curriculum. When learning strategies, organization and time management skills are integrated, as shown in Figure 2, the student's self-awareness of his/her learning style may develop (Spector & Decker, 1989). As a result of this kind of training, students with learning disabilities can become more responsible learners allowing the role of school personnel to be limited to monitoring their progress.

(Insert Figure 2 about here.)

Finally, planning for the transition from high school to a postsecondary setting must begin early. Several steps should be included in such preparation:

1) students must actively participate in the decision-making process of the IEP, ITP and in course and program selection,

2) students must be taught to explain their learning disability in simple terms and how to request specific modifications and accommodations,

3) students and parents should work together to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to select appropriate postsecondary training or employment,

4) transition from junior high schools should include careful program monitoring of learning disabled students who choose not to receive services in high school,

5) program decisions must be made with a full understanding of the implications for transition, particularly with college-bound students,

6) course waivers or substitutions must be based upon well-documented diagnosis, and implications for postsecondary education must be understood and specified, and

7) high school and college programs requiring more than the traditional four years should be encouraged.

Conclusion

The issues raised in this paper are intended to provoke the reader's interest and to bring about action. Our success in making high school a productive experience for students with learning disabilities now challenges us to the next level of effort. Our secondary programs should be enhanced to go beyond just getting students through high school to a level of nurturing the independence necessary for transition to postsecondary education and adult life.

Many of the suggestions described here will require administrative and parental support. It is necessary, therefore, to discuss these issues with those constituencies. The traditional role of the learning disability resource room will have to undergo a major overhaul in many schools. Parents and educators will have to work together to help students move along the continuum from dependence and "learned helplessness" to independence and self-advocacy. It is encouraging to note that many schools have already begun to make these changes with positive results for teachers, parents and students.

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Figure 1

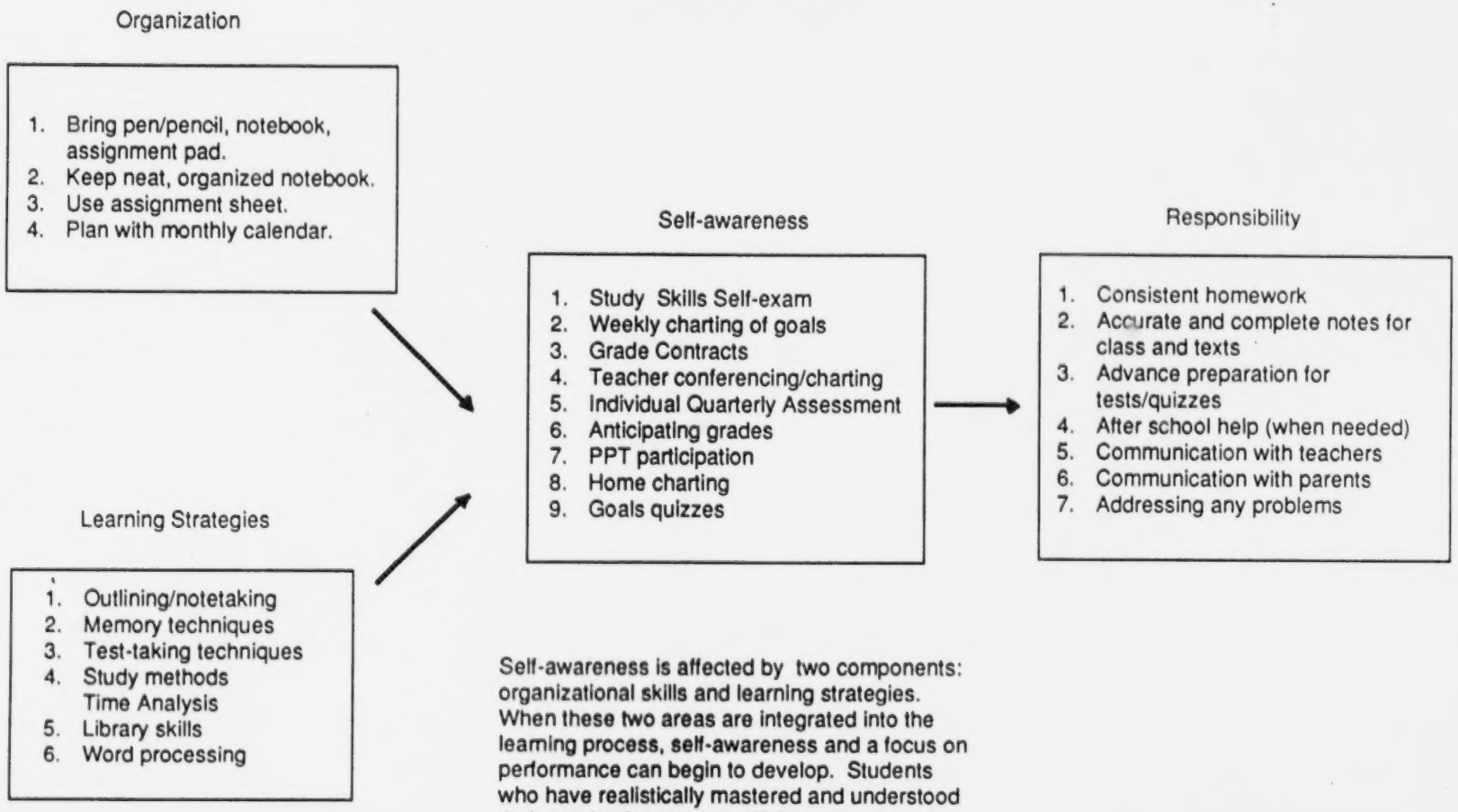
HIGH SCHOOL	COLLEGE
Class Time	
- 6 hours per day, 180 days Total? 1, 080 hours!	- 12 hours per week, 28 weeks Total? 336 hours!
Study Time	
- Whatever it takes to do your homework! 1-2 hours per day?	- Rule of thumb: 2 hours of study for 1 hour of class. 3-4 hours per day?
Tests	
- Weekly; at the end of a chapter; frequent quizzes.	- 2 to 4 per semester; at the end of a four chapter unit; at 8:00 am on the Monday after Homecoming!
Grades	
- "Passing" grades guarantee you a seat!	- Satisfactory academic standing = C's or above!
Teachers	
- Often take attendance - May check your notebooks - Put info on the blackboard - Impart knowledge and facts	- Rarely teach you the textbook - Often lecture non-stop - Require library research - Challenge you to think
Freedom	
- Structured defines it most of the time! - Limits are set: by parents, by teachers, by adults.	- The single greatest problem most college students face! - Should I go to class? - Should I plan on four, five, six, or ten hours of sleep?

The Challenge of Change: Gearing UP for Life After High School (McGuire, J. M., 1988)

Figure 2

Study Skills Curriculum

Goal: promote independent and responsible learning



Self-awareness is affected by two components: organizational skills and learning strategies. When these two areas are integrated into the learning process, self-awareness and a focus on performance can begin to develop. Students who have realistically mastered and understood their academic progress will then have become responsible for their educational program.

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